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# Get Ready!

A FUN SUMMER PROGRAM  
TO HELP PREPARE THE SPECIAL CHILD  
FOR REGULAR SCHOOL



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with contributions from  
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Original Picture Symbols  
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## Introduction

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One sunny day in May, about twelve of us – educators, administrators, private therapists, my husband and I – met around a well-worn school conference table to decide our son's fate for the next academic year. Our son, Pace, has autism. He had just turned six. At that point he was barely speaking. He recoiled from social contact. He could not paint, draw, color, or even hold a pencil with much conviction. He was clumsy on the playground, couldn't ride a bike, and would balk at the idea of joining in an organized game. Yet, all who knew him had to agree that the small person who existed inside of all these many drawbacks was brilliant, keenly aware, and highly sensitive. It would greatly matter where and with whom he would be placed as he began his formal schooling.

An uncomfortable silence settled on the room. Someone called for air. The aging windows were cracked and hoisted, peeling paint rained down upon the window sill, and a warm breeze blew, bringing the welcome fragrance of daffodils and hyacinths. Then the pronouncement came.

Pace would be enrolled in a regular Kindergarten classroom with typical peers the next fall.

*Hallelujah!*

The school to which he was assigned is a medium-sized public elementary school in our county that has earned an excellent reputation for supporting children with special needs. Well-known for its culture of kindness and acceptance, this school takes pride in serving every child – from the most gifted to the most challenged. While we were overjoyed that he would be placed in such a fine, inclusionary setting, that decision also threw us into a state of utter panic. Didn't they know? Pace – practically nonverbal, transition-fearing, hyper-sensitive, easily frustrated, hitting-kicking-screaming, can't-even-put-his-own-socks-on, still-not-potty-reliable Pace – was NOT READY.

Oh, he had had hundreds and hundreds, maybe even thousands of hours of intervention that included speech therapy, occupational therapy, group classes with other autistic children, church-based preschool, a year of Montessori school, a special-needs PreK class in our neighborhood elementary school, and tons of home-based programming. But he was still far from being able to function even moderately well in a typical school setting with children his own age.

We knew that if this was going to work, if Pace was going to make it among all these lovely, empathetic, curious, supportive, typical children, if Pace was going to get the full benefit from this great gift, and not just struggle along on the periphery, then Pace was going to have to acquire some coping skills, boost his expressive speech, and iron out some of his motor and sensory issues — FAST.

We searched for a program. None existed that would do all that we needed.

Luckily, earlier in the year, we had hired a crackerjack graduate student to help with child care. Gina Steinsberger (we now refer to her as “Gee-da,” because that is what Pace calls her), was working towards her Master’s Degree in Speech and Language Pathology at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. She was strong, creative, eager, and unafraid. We felt sure that if we could just come up with a plan, she would run it like a top.

So we targeted three goals:

- ① BOOST EXPRESSIVE SPEECH
- ② ENHANCE SOCIAL SKILLS
- ③ IMPROVE MOTOR ABILITY

To meet these goals we set out to provide Pace with situations that would encourage him to endure sudden changes with minimal protest, enjoy new experiences, become proficient with a wider range of recreational activities, and learn what it is to have and to be a friend.

We designed a three-part program that consisted of:

- ① A LANGUAGE-BUILDING FIELD TRIP
- ② A CIRCLE OF FRIENDS
- ③ ONE-ON-ONE PHYSICAL EXERCISE.

To cover all the components, it took six to eight hours a week, spread out over three different days, and we chose to conduct the program for a period of eight weeks.

Gina did take the ball and run with it. In fact, she ran with it so well, I asked her to contribute her thoughts and suggestions to this book. You will find her comments scattered throughout. Be sure to read them. After all, Gina was on the front line and contributed much of the heart and soul and plenty of smarts and sweat to the success of this endeavor.

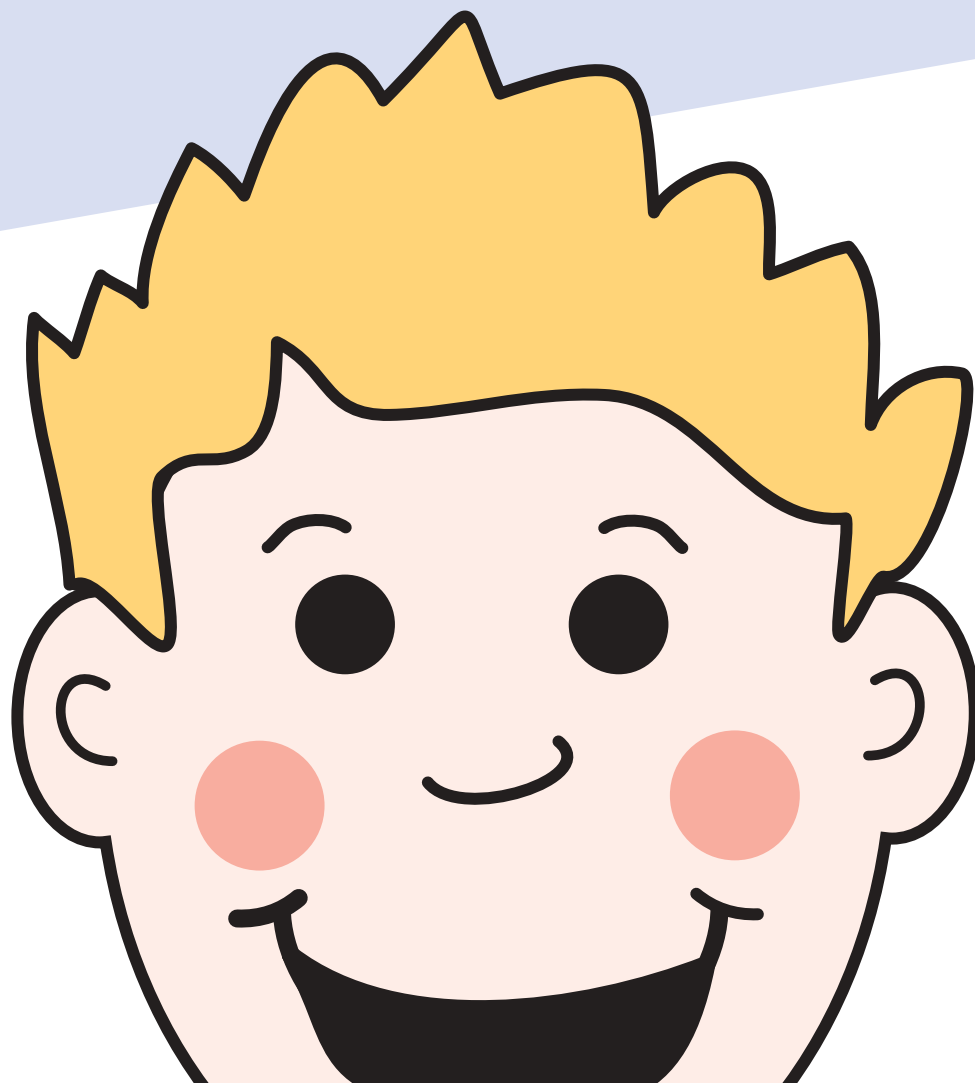
We hope this program works for you, too, no matter where you are on the panic scale as you think about what to do with your summer. Please know that this program is not just for children with autism. It would be helpful to any child who has communication difficulties, low social skills, motor development issues, or just needs a confidence boost.

When you do the program, it's best to do the whole thing. It may be tempting to emphasize one activity more than others. We know. Every child has a different constellation of strengths and weaknesses, and that naturally makes you want to focus on the area in which you see the most need. However, we discovered that a certain synergy is created by doing all parts of the program every week. So do try to cover all the bases, and chances are good you will see a greater benefit.

The main thing is to have fun. After the eight weeks are over, your family will have seen a few new places, picked up a few new skills, and surely given your child a stronger start for school the next fall. And, we can tell you from experience, that is going to feel great for EVERYBODY.

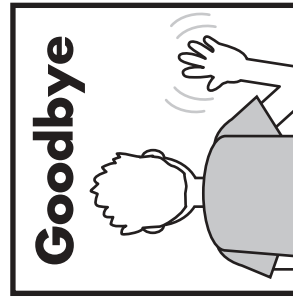
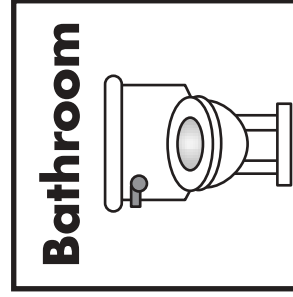
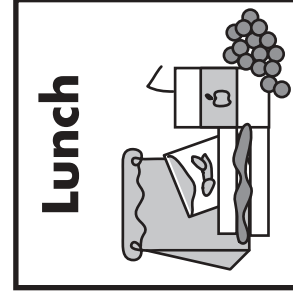
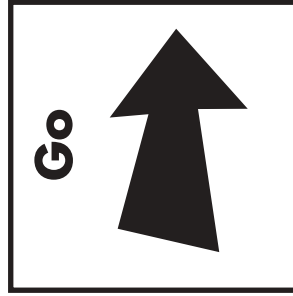
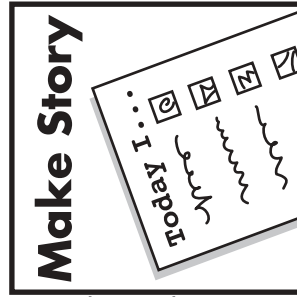
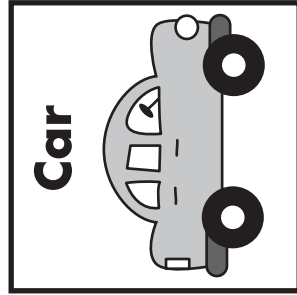
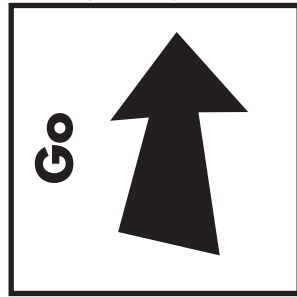
## A Thought From Gina

Field trips are experiential learning, and preparation is the key to getting the most out of the experience. So, to make the agenda clear, use pictures. To address any fears, use pictures. This is especially important for the child who cannot verbalize questions or reservations he may have about what you are asking him to do. It is essential to make the trip fun for the child. Play is the work of the child, and with appropriate support, a child with special needs can play and learn hand-in-hand, just like typically developing peers. You will have better success if you provide concrete examples of the abstract ideas we use to describe the world around us.



(SAMPLE SCHEDULE BOARD)

# Today:



## *A Thought From Gina*

The Circle of Friends is a great opportunity to address social skills for *all* the children involved, not just the child with communication difficulties.

# The Rules

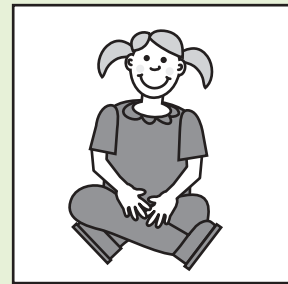
1. Ignore inappropriate behavior.



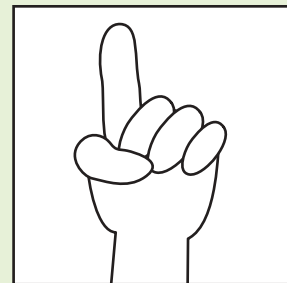
2. Share and take turns.



3. Keep your hands and feet to yourself.



4. Follow the leader's first request.



5. Try new things.



6. HAVE FUN!



## Afterword

When Pace got to Kindergarten after our “1,2,3, Get Ready!” summer, there were moments that felt like miracles.

Pace, checking in like all the other kids, putting his mail in the mailbox, lunch ticket in the money drawer, backpack in the cubby, signing in with his name, then taking his spot on the rug. **Wow.**

Pace, participating in the Pledge of Allegiance, moment of silence, then taking his turn to go to the window and observe the weather, and place the correct symbol in the correct slot. **Amazing.**

Pace in Circle Time, paying close attention to the other children and attempting to sing and do hand motions to all the songs. **Incredible.**

Pace at the computer (the most coveted seat in the room) kids crowding in from both sides, jabbering advice, totally in his face and in his space – and he is just **fine.**

Pace in the cafeteria with lots of noise, strict rules to follow, new food, strange smells. **No problem.**

Pace on the playground, climbing, swinging, running, then holding hands with special friends on the walk all the way back to the classroom. **Brings tears to the eyes.**

Pace in the end-of-year outdoor pageant, sticking to his spot, doing the song and dance, hanging in and enjoying himself for a solid hour and a half. **Is this for real?**

**Yes.** It absolutely is. And we hope it can be for you, too. Is our program a cure-all? No, probably not. Can it help with areas that are such a challenge to a communication-impaired child? Yes, decidedly so. Give it a try.

**We'll be rootin' for you.**